

## Pirate Film Cultures in Manila (with Jasmine Nadua Trice)

[opening music]

**Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (JLR):** Welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today we are discussing informal media markets, cinephilia, and the film cultures of the Philippines. Our guest is Dr. Jasmine Nadua Trice. She is Associate Professor of Cinema and Media Studies in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media at the University of California Los Angeles.

She has written on Southeast Asian women filmmakers, ethnoburban multiplexes, production subcultures in Los Angeles, visual culture and embodiment in colonial Manila, and the relationship between film practice and theory.

Her first book, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* (Duke University Press, 2021) examines the politics of cinema circulation in early 2000s Manila, Philippines. Jasmine, welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast.

**Dr. Jasmine Nadua Trice (JNT):** Thank you so much for having me, Juan.

**JLR:** I'd like to start asking you about your research interests. How would you describe these topics and why do they interest you? And why are they an important area for us to study?

**JNT:** So, I would say at the really, the very broadest level, I'm interested in the ways that film practitioners grapple with the transformations wrought by what you might call global modernities, particularly in moments of political, social and maybe technological change. And so when I talk about global modernities, sometimes this can take, for example, spatial forms.

So the ways that city spaces have been transformed through the building of malls, privatized condominium complexes, casino high rises, or even in rural areas, there are filmmakers who are dealing with the building and construction of dams, often funded through foreign direct investment and things like this. And my work is primarily, right now, in Southeast Asia though not exclusively.

So when I say the term film practice, I mean it very expansively to include filmmakers who might engage with images of urban development, but also archivists who have to deal with the lack of

state support as well as the conditions in many places of tropical weather or increased flooding due to climate change. Film festival programmers who have to deal with censorship, and even, I would say, audiences who might just quickly respond to texts in social media platforms.

So I'm interested in making sense of a pretty broad constellation of practices to give a holistic picture of how the networks of cultural practices and institutions that we understand as the cinema become meaningful within a particular time and space.

**JLR:** Great. So today we're discussing specifically one of your articles called "Manila's New Cinephilia," which is published in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* in 2015. Could you start by giving us a brief history of this article, when these ideas began to originate? How did it come about? How did it change the process of research and writing?

**JNT:** So, the article actually was really a matter of circumstance. I had pursued a different project, or related, but different project on Quiapo, which is one of ... at the time, in the early aughts was really the hub of pirated media in formal DVD circulation. It was the main marketplace in the city. And so, I became a frequent shopper of the space, but in the space, but also became really interested in it for my book project.

And so I also became interested in the ways that it was being constructed and imagined in the burgeoning internet culture of the early aughts, so message boards and things like this, blogs, and I ended up gathering a lot more examples of people talking about Quiapo and talking about pirated DVDs that I could actually use.

And so I ended up using material in a book chapter and then in another article that was published before this one. And I had material left over, and so I wasn't quite sure what I would do with it, if anything. A lot of the filmmakers and organizers that I worked with and knew in Manila were really, really intense cinephiles, but I think the practices didn't always fit in with a lot of the discourse that was being published, sort of in the wake of the transition to digital. And so I became interested in that gap and ways to explore it. And I did have all of this material that I hadn't really used elsewhere, and so that's how this article came about.

**JLR:** So, this article focuses on Manila generally and the Quiapo market, and as you mentioned earlier, a lot of your research is on Southeast Asia. So can you tell us a little bit about why this is the site where you're investigating your interests, and broadly film practices and across production and reception? What is it about that site that is interesting or generative?

**JNT:** Thanks. So, again, and I think this is such a good lesson to learn, maybe, for students, but I was really open to the contingencies of what happens when you go and you pursue a field of research and chance kind of puts you in a particular place, at a particular time.

So I really wanted to go to the Philippines because I had family there and it was a personal impetus partly. I had lived there as a kid, I wanted to go back as an adult and I had read about the really robust film culture there that had sort of blossomed mid-century and taken off during the 70s and 80s in a more sort of art cinema format, which I can talk about later.

And so I wanted to go and see what this was about, and I had this project in mind that was really going to be about malls and mall multiplex cinemas, and that ended up being one chapter in the book. But when I got there, I ended up meeting programmers and critics and people ... filmmakers who were really doing new things with what, at the time, was this burgeoning medium of low-cost digital video.

And so, this was something that was happening in urban metros and also regional centers around Southeast Asia as well. And so I also eventually became involved with this group called the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas, which I'm still involved with, which at the time was doing really important work to bring together people who were invested in film from all walks of life, people were conjunctionally interested in movies. Students, but also filmmakers, archivists, critics and academics.

And so I ended up just coming to Manila and moving there at a really good time. And I think when I began to watch more of the films and participate in screenings and read people's criticism in writing, I just thought that it was such a rich example of the ways that different communities can come together and produce really compelling work in multiple registers that was engaging often with some of these structural problems are a significant part of the context there.

So a lack of exhibition spaces, a lack of a centralized archive. So, a sense that there wasn't a lot of infrastructural support for independent filmmaking at that time. There was just beginning to be through organizations like Cinemalaya and film festivals like Cinema One, but it was really something that was just beginning to emerge in the early aughts.

**JLR:** Great. So, you've been mentioning a lot about the practices of archiving or cinema audiences. Could you tell us a little bit about what Philippine's cinema was like, what the films were like, what kind of subjects were covered? You mentioned the independent cinema starting to emerge then, but what was mainstream cinema like at the time?

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**JNT:** Mainstream cinema was coming out of ... well, there were two major media conglomerates, GMA and ABS-CBN at the time. And they sort of had affiliated stars, so the star system is really huge. And the stars are also very much a part of the cityscape. And I should say also that I'm giving a very Manila-centric narrative of film culture. It's really specific to Manila.

And so people from other parts of the region, from Cebu, from other parts of the region, Mindanao, they might listen to this and think, this is not Philippine film culture, this is really specifically Manila. And so I just also want to clarify that, because that's important.

But I would say ABS-CBN and GMA were the two major media conglomerates, and so you had lots of *teleseryes*, like telenovela type of soap operas and then the stars would also do genre pictures and they would be arranged into love teams and pop songs and endorsements that would be in these huge billboards that lined the streets of Manila.

And so the what you might call the popular cinema, popular media was really ubiquitous, but at the same time the number of films that were being made was really going down at the time in the late 90s. And so then the numbers picked up with the advent of digital video and independent productions. And I would say in the 90s, there were a lot of films being made. I shouldn't say that it's like there was nothing going on, because there were. They were just really quickly produced.

They were called essentially "seven-seven," films that were seven days in production or seven days in post-production. So, it's not as if work wasn't being made. So those films I think were ... they had a particular place in the media scape. And then that ended up changing in the post-millennial period and you ended up having more independent productions, which were ... and you're asking about the specific films.

So, I quote at the beginning of the article *Todo Todo Teros* which is a film that was, I think, made 2006, 2007. I think it's a good example to talk about film from this period, because it uses this degraded video aesthetic. And it's a lot of found footage in some ways. Not exactly found footage, but footage captured on-the-fly and then later structured together in a collage. And the filmmaker, Jon Torres, he's, I think, also a writer and does a voiceover. It's kind of a love story. Part of it is about someone that he met in the international film festival circuits that he had a relationship with.

And it's also about the figure of the media pirate and about the kind of volatility of borders and the ways that, for example, people from the Philippines could be put on terrorist [00:13:30] watch lists and things like this. So he kind of plays with this idea of the figure of the media pirate

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and the idea of filmmakers participating in that culture of piracy and what that might mean in a broader global film context. So, that's one example.

**JLR:** A film that I've shown in class before is *Woman in the Septic Tank*.

**JNT:** Oh yeah.

**JLR:** Which also is reflective about its place in the world and the potential for circulating in the films' festival circuit. And also very emblematic of the star system that you mentioned, in the terms of also drawing attention to previous forms of film production that relied on bankable stars and all this investment from the main networks, and then marrying that with the independent digital-born filmmaking as well.

**JNT:** I've shown that film in class as well, it's such a good example for the ways that sort of the desire for festival accolades can go sideways. That's a really-

**JLR:** Exactly.

**JNT:** ... great example.

**JLR:** It's very self-reflexive about the assumptions that we make about what is ... I don't know, art or quality film for festivals. Well, speaking of film practices and I think film festivals really tie into this as well, but one of the key crucial concepts of this analysis in this article is cinephilia and I think you mentioned that you were looking at film practices broadly to think about this infrastructural aspect of film circulation, but a lot of this material then found this different angle or found this different venue when you thought about it through cinephilia. So, can you give us a brief take on the concept of cinephilia and how you're using it in the article?

**JNT:** Yeah, sure. So, as I mentioned earlier, I'm not exactly a cinephilia scholar. This is the only thing I've written about it. But I think it's an interesting term, partly because there's this crossover between what you might call more public criticism that's in newspapers and magazines, which sometimes use or mobilize this term and academic analysis of film.

So, it's an anglicized-French term that I think emerged in the 1920s alongside cine-clubs and things like this, and then it's most associated with Andre Bazin and critics who presaged the French new wave in post-World War II France. And then it became associated with auteur theory in the 1960s. So Andrew Sarris' appropriation of that term, of the auteur, the director who was the author of the film and became associated with that. And then film and media

studies as it moved into the academy began to, as a field, become more interested in different kinds of critical tools.

And so ideas around screen theory and things like this were certainly interested in really devoted analysis of the text, but maybe not thinking about pleasure in the same ways and not thinking about the idea of the love of cinema in that way, and so things shifted. But you also had modes of analysis that were somewhat similar to what people had thought about with cinephilia, in terms of the love of cinema, like fandom studies with the work of Henry Jenkins or even cult and paracinematic practices, which are working in a much more, you could say, popular context, looking at movies that aren't necessarily the types of things that would get called auteur movies but that are really important and interesting in using closed reading practices for that.

And I think cinephilia has really been associated with close reading of films or really being closely engaged with the text and the image. So, I think the second wave, what some critics have called cinephilia two, really began with digital media and the way that celluloid was being supplanted by digital.

And so in 1996, Susan Sontag published this manifesto on the decay of cinema, which was basically about ... it was kind of a nostalgic lament for the theatrical exhibition. I became interested in some of this discourse and also some of the work by scholars who are trying to complicate and trouble some of its underlying assumptions. So I quote Dale Hudson and Patricia Zimmerman's work, and they're really interested in the ways that this idea of digital cinephilia really became this technophilia that was really aligned with transnational media corporations.

And so they said it was a kind of diminishment on the potentials of basically the public. It was about fetishizing technology, consumerism, retreating into the individualized home space, what Barbara Klinger has called ... I think it's like a fortress mentality of the early aughts. And so kind of a post-9/11 fortress mentality of wanting to stay home.

It's interesting, actually, to think about that in a post-pandemic context. So, I think Hudson and Zimmerman's piece, which is from 2009, was really trying to complicate ideas about cinephilia and think about what its potentials might be if you took it outside of that context.

**JLR:** For sure. I think one of the things that's interesting in cinephilia as a concept and as discourse is how it's shifted given cinema's technical and institutional different formation, from the emergence of cine-clubs to the *Cahiers* auteur theory version of cinephilia, to the turn of the century new digital technologies as well.

And as you mentioned the cognate terms, in terms of thinking of cult film and fandom, which share some of that ... in the broader sense, the love of particular texts. I think as you rightly pointed out, one of the things that's interesting about cinephilia is it keeps coming back to ... one of the distinguishing aspects is this emphasis on close reading and on aspects of form. The part that I'm more familiar with in terms of cinephilia is in the now the rise of videographic criticism, which is also the result of digital technologies and the ubiquity that we can find content for all of this.

And a lot of early video essays are really about narrowing in on that one small moment in that one film and what does that all mean, and tying it into all these broader thinking about the medium. And so those kinds of practices seem to be the through line, of really focusing on form, focusing on close reading. Even as there's new potentials opened up by the new technologies, and restrictions as well. I think the aspect around being tied to transnational corporations and which DVDs have the super special version with all the extras that really foster that sense of really caring about the craft? Or what we could think about it now as the Criterion Collection version of which films are valued more than others. Something to be interrogated.

One of the things in this, let's say broader discourse around cinephilia and pushing out the assumptions that it has, and how do we rethink them? One of the assumptions that you in your article push at is shifting the focus of cinephilia from the consumption aspect, or the criticism aspect, as you point out is one of those terms that bridges the popular criticism and the academic aspect. But your work here focuses on circulation as the locus or the focus for cinephilia. Can you tell us more about that?

**JNT:** As I was gathering materials to work with and thinking about the ways that the DVD marketplaces were being constructed and imagined in all of these online forums, and then also thinking about my own media practices, which are not really in the article, but are background in the article.

I became interested in the kinds of work that audience members were willing to do to locate DVDs. Some of them are classic movies or things like this, but some of them are just movies that weren't really around in the theaters or were really expensive in the theaters. And people were really willing to develop a pretty robust set of skills.

And I think I became interested in the ways that that was also a form of cinephilia, and it worked very differently from the close attention to form and aesthetics and the text outside of the narrative that really characterizes a lot of ideas of cinephilia. And I became more interested in the kinds of investments that drive people to participate in message boards, laying out maps

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where you can go to this vendor and get this film, and this is the best time to go, this is the neighborhood you want to go to.

And I became interested in the amount of work that people were willing to do and how it might be beneficial to think about that work and that expertise alongside these concepts that have been thought about in very particular ways around classics of world cinema, that type of thing, and close readings of text. That stuff is great. I love watching video essays and things like that too, but I also think there's something really great about people developing really specific knowledge and sharing it as a means to getting access to a particular set of films.

**JLR:** For sure. I think it's something we kind of take for granted in the dominant way of thinking about cinephilia. It's like, we'll have access to this film. We will go and watch it in this movie theater or at this film festival. But that's not the case for so many people around the world, for a variety of infrastructural, legal barriers that don't allow them to be able to access them. So developing the skills and the knowhow and the again, the interest, the very love of cinema to find those access to those films that they wouldn't otherwise. It's important to consider within that as well.

There's one informal media vendor in Mexico City who stands just outside the *cinematheque*, and he has a full spread categorized by country, genre, director, so all of that. But he's also very knowledgeable about all the different releases and so if you ask for something in particular, he'll be able to tell you who has it or whether he can get it within the new few weeks. And that knowledge and knowhow is impressive, even on such a small scale. I'm always fascinated to go and check out what stuff he has every day.

**JNT:** That's great. Is he still there now?

**JLR:** As far as I know, he was. I haven't been since the pandemic started, so I don't know how that has impacted, but he was there last time I visited, which was literally just before the pandemic. I think I went before that.

**JNT:** Oh, that's great.

**JLR:** So it's always fascinating to follow those trends too. So, I've been calling it informal media distribution, but one of the things that you touched on, and this is part of how we refer to these markets, is whether or not they're pirate markets.

And you do mention how a lot of these films are ... a way that people can have access to them is through piracy, because there are no legal avenues for them to do that. But you also make an

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important distinction to not think of piracy as inherently a resistant practice. There are nuances to what piracy allows and doesn't allow. So, can you tell us a bit more about that and how you're thinking about the role of piracy in this context?

**JNT:** Yeah. Well, I just think it's very easy to, especially as somebody ... I lived in Manila as a little, little kid, but I'm mostly based outside. And I think it's very easy for somebody, even when I went there for research, I lived there for a couple of years. I think it's easy to romanticize practices that are extremely mundane for people for whom it is just everyday life. And I think it can skew into some exoticism, I think.

And so I think that's one aspect of it. For myself, I really want to resist tendencies towards especially diasporic romanticism, which I think is really easy and I have to check myself on that when I'm doing research. And then the other thing too, which Ramon Lobato has written about is this idea of ... the idea that what's being pirated is already being distributed.

And so there are some instances, like John Torres, the filmmaker I mentioned earlier, he's written an essay called "Piracy Boom Boom," which was about trying to distribute his movies through DVD vendors ... pirated DVD vendors or informal DVD vendors. And I think Lav Diaz has also tried that, another independent filmmaker based in Manila area.

It's important to think of informal circulation as a really quotidian part of everyday life in probably the majority of the world, especially in the early 2000s. And if you broaden that out to encompass digital piracy, torrents and so on, it's probably the majority of how people access their movies.

**JLR:** But it's also interesting that there are ... and I think Brian Larkin made this argument too for Nigeria, but once the infrastructure's set up for these informal vendors, it allows for creatives who don't have an outlet in those established mainstream transnational corporation-owned channels to also get a way to distribute, or at least attempt to.

So there is that potential, but that doesn't mean that the entire system is necessarily this big resistance. One of the things that piracy generally does, and even more so now with digital piracy, is it sort of upends this idea of the original and the copy. What used to be a very specific tangible thing, of saying, this is the original version of the film and then we can tell what the copies are because it's been ripped on a VHS so the quality's way different.

Or it's on a VCD, so the quality is very different. But now with the digital technology, even the original film being purely digital and the copy being purely digital, that distinction is collapsing. So how is that relevant to thinking about cinephilia and thinking about film practices broadly?

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**JNT:** Well, I think there's a strain of cinephilia discourse that is really about connoisseurship and part of that connoisseurship is sometimes about getting particular editions of particular works. If you don't have the kind of rarity of the film print, then if you're going to ... or even public screenings, being able to catch an exhibition of X film.

So, part of this is ownership of particular titles, this kind of connoisseurship around special editions, Blu-ray, et cetera, et cetera. I don't even know exactly what the words are to use, to be honest, because I don't really collect things that way.

And so I think it's just really interesting to think about, there is this attempt to create structures of rarity around something that's infinitely reproducible through these special editions. And so what interests me in part about piracy or informal DVD circulation is this idea that it undermines this idea of the original, and in some ways undermines the technological fetishism that can come alongside that, this kind of privileging of clarity and resolution.

And so I think those dynamics, I think, are really interesting around the original and the copy and their relationship to people's fixation on technology and connoisseurship.

**JLR:** And to the flip side of what you were mentioning about this technological fetishism, you also point out the emphasis on the technology as a particular knowledge, that the consumers, let's say, or the cinephiles of Manila have to have about how to acquire access to these films.

So it's not just the accessing the message boards and creating the map and figuring out where the vendor goes, but then also developing even street smarts about how to figure out if the copy will be good or if it's worth buying, which I think is fascinating. And it's something that when we think of only the official channels of distribution, we don't even think about that. It's sort of implied, but it gives us another dimension to that as well, into those practices as well.

**JNT:** Yeah. I mean, there is this really interesting necessary attention to the object in interesting ways. The specifics of the surface of the disk and whether it's blue or gold and what other clues you can put together to figure out its origins or whether the resolution might be good, and these kinds of things. So I thought the way that people shared and circulated that information as well, I thought was really interesting.

**JLR:** It's sort of a vernacular version of archivist practice of trying to figure out where the copy is coming from and how to preserve it in some ways. This one is perhaps less broad in its goals, but it's just about figuring out the ... from the object, what can I tell about the text that I'll be able to read from it, as well, too.

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So kind of related, I wanted to ask generally about method. And you mentioned this a little bit earlier in terms of you were in Manila for a couple of years doing, not this research in particular, but research in general from where this material comes from. But can you talk a little bit more about that, in terms of how would you characterize your methods and how are they helpful in the kinds of questions and topics that you're focusing on for your research?

**JNT:** So, I came from a very interdisciplinary PhD program, and so I think that really informs my approach. So my PhD program, the department isn't around anymore, but it was called Communication and Culture, and it was at Indiana University. And so it was divided into three areas. One was rhetoric and public culture, another one was film and media studies, and another one was performance studies and ethnography. And so I worked with people who had expertise in film and media studies as well as people who were very interested in discourse analysis and rhetoric, and people who are very interested in ethnographic practices.

And I think my approach to research generally is kind of informed by that, in some ways, methodological looseness. Maybe looseness isn't the best word. A kind of methodological-

**JLR:** Eclecticism?

**JNT:** Eclecticism is much better. I was coming up with words like idiosyncrasy, but that just doesn't sound right either. Eclecticism. So, I'm interested in developing arguments and theoretical models that really work from the materials, I think.

And so as I mentioned about the origins of this project, it really was I had some materials and I had had these experiences and those were around for a while, and then I came across this body of discourse, saw friction there and thought I'd put them together.

There was a little bit of happenstance and intuition involved, but I think I always ... I think in some circles and some fields, it's grounded theory or mid-level theorizing or some words or phrases that are used to talk about this kind of approach. But I think my approach has been to look at things through multiple lenses and to build out the argument from the materials.

**JLR:** Great. And you mentioned this earlier, that you also meet with film programmers or curators and get a sense for their experiences as well. And then working through the message boards to figure out what, let's say, the everyday film consumer is also doing. So even within the focusing on the location is also the different stakeholders, or focusing on different people as well.

**JNT:** Yeah.

**JLR:** So you said you haven't focused specifically on the aspect of cinephilia, but you did have a broader sense of ... a body of research in terms of Manila and film practices in Manila. So how have you built on that work since this article came out and into the book ... which came out this year, 2021.

**JNT:** Yeah, 2021. So, this is something I always tell my grad students is, don't feel bad if it takes a really, really long time to get your work out, because it may become more historical. And I think that's actually what ended up happening, is I look at work that I was publishing really close to when I was actually living in Manila and writing about a particular time period. And the further along that I got in terms ... or the further along that ... the more distance ...

I guess the more distance that I ended up having from that particular time period, the more clear the specificity became, that it was really located within a particular set of technologies of production and circulation that were, in the case of informal circulation, really geographically located in ways that they are no longer.

And so I think that was really key. And it's also about a very specific moment of internet history that predates smart phones, predates social media. And so it became very much about this very specific early aughts moment of transition.

**JLR:** Especially in this moment of very quick, very accelerated technological change, from the moment you were there and learning about the processes to the moment it gets published to when we're reading it now, let's say six years later, the kinds of changes are just significant in many, many ways.

So it almost becomes like you wrote a film history, an archival or an ethnography of a moment that has completely disappeared, even though it was less than two decades ago, and that value of capturing that moment when it happened is significant too.

**JNT:** Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting to think about the way things have changed, because there are more micro cinemas that have opened up in Manila since over the past maybe eight years, five years. Some of them have closed since the pandemic.

And there are a lot of streaming outlets now, like iFlix is one. Netflix is there and HBO, of course, but also other ones that are based more in the region, like iFlix and Hook and View. So, I think

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streaming is a really important part of media circulation now, which is also really different, of course.

**JLR:** And I'm sure that also shapes how we think about, I guess, technologically-driven cinephilia now. If there were some particular changes, like you were mentioning Zimmerman and others were theorizing in the early 2000s, now 20 years later those ranges of cinema practices is ... it's a whole other can of worms as well, right?

**JNT:** Right.

**JLR:** I think the other thing you mentioned is the aspect of the local, and I think when you made the distinction, this is very much Manila focused research and it speaks to those practices. That kind of becomes central to how we think about generally global media, because there's this fascination to thinking about the global generally as if we can generalize to the whole world.

There was push towards thinking about the nation as this container where we can make those assumptions. But I think in this work, as you point out, there's something about the specifics of that city that is very different from other cities within the nation. While at the same time, there's connections to cities elsewhere in the world, in terms of the infrastructure and the institutions that allow these films to circulate, right?

**JNT:** Yeah. I mean, it's really fascinating, I think. And there's a lot of really interesting work that's being done, or that has been done over the past few years that's really much more attentive to the specificities of film cultures and in, as I mentioned places like Mindanao, Patrick Campos is publishing really great work in that area. Sablano Cinema. So, it's, I think, really important not to think about Manila as representative of the Philippines, which is this archipelagic place with so many different languages and cultures and so on.

And in some ways maybe Manila in the early aughts would've shared ... had more similarities with Bangkok in the early aughts than with Davao in the early aughts. I mean, I'm not saying that's necessary true, but the possibility is there. And to think about the similarities between places like Chang Mai, Jogjakarta, and Baguio, or something like this, places that are not necessarily the capital cities but have become hubs of different kinds of cultural and arts practices.

I think these different ways of thinking about the geographies that form global media, I think they're really important.

**JLR:** For sure. So, Jasmine, thank you for joining us.

**JNT:** Thank you so much.

[closing credits music]

**JLR:** This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu, and closing credits music by Cloud Mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world, to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.